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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ DIRTY TRICKS, THE ROSALES "BUBBLE," AND THE
POTENTIAL FOR ELECTION-RELATED VIOLENCE

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. Apart from a few rock-throwing attacks by Chavistas, the Rosales and Chavez campaigns have to date largely stayed away from each other. However, the December 3 presidential election will inevitably put ardent activists of both camps in close proximity. Both the Chavez and Rosales campaigns are predicting victory and urging their voters to gather outside polling stations around closing time on December 3, despite a government decree that prohibits public gatherings that day. A sizable Chavez victory, such as a 10-20 point win as predicted in recent polling, is more likely to pop the prevailing "bubble" of optimism in the Rosales camp, than it is likely to spark violence. But the closer the margin of victory for either side the greater risk that there could be some election-related violence. This is particularly true if the government commits widespread electoral fraud to win or to increase its margin of victory. Moreover, there remains a real risk that the Chavez government could create scattered election day incidents or overreact to any opposition claims of election day fraud. Embassy has taken appropriate steps for the contingency of election-related violence. End Summary.

Pre-Election Shadow Boxing

12. (C) President Chavez' supporters have been responsible for election campaign violence to date. On several occasions, opposition candidate Manuel Rosales' campaign entourage has been pelted with rocks and bottles by Chavistas at campaign stops. After such incidents in early September, President Chavez suggested that Rosales was "provoking" electoral violence by trying to campaign in traditional Chavez strongholds. Rosales supporters allege that the November 19 shooting of a Merida state Rosales campaign official was politically motivated. Ironically, Chavez and other BRV officials continue to warn, without substantiation, of U.S.-backed opposition plans to declare fraud and launch a "destabilizing" demonstration campaign in Venezuela. These government warnings may be convenient cover to lay future blame on the opposition for the government's own plans to create election day incidents or part of a broader electoral strategy to intimidate Rosales voters into staying home on December 3.

13. (C) The Rosales camp urged its supporters some weeks ago

to "defend the vote" by gathering outside polling stations before the 4:00 p.m. official closing time. While Rosales' advisors acknowledge that the campaign will not be able to generate crowds outside all of the over 11,000 polling stations, they still hope that, at the polling stations where they can mobilize groups, local officials will feel compelled to comply scrupulously with poll closing, reporting, and auditing procedures. The Ministry of Interior and Justice (MIJ) issued on November 25 a resolution prohibiting during December 2-3 all public meetings and demonstrations that might affect the electoral process.

14. (C) The resolution claimed the prohibition was to maintain order. The opposition has interpreted this as an effort to inhibit pro-Rosales groups, as well as evidence of nervousness in the Chavez camp. Rosales campaign advisers tell us that they still plan to mobilize their supporters outside polling stations in Rosales-friendly neighborhoods on December 3. Moreover, compounding the prospect for election day clashes, the Chavez campaign is also now encouraging its supporters to gather outside polling stations. In addition, Chavez has urged his supporters to rally in front of the Miraflores presidential mansion at 8:00 p.m. on December 3.

Election Day Scenarios

15. (C) Buoyed by the impressive turn-out at Rosales' November 25 Caracas rally and other well-attended rallies in numerous states, many Rosales supporters, including at least some top aides, appear convinced that Rosales will win on December 3. Rosales has carefully tried to project himself to potential voters as the underdog who has enough political momentum to pull off an upset on December 3. At the same time, his close advisers tell us that Rosales is prepared to publicly accept an electoral defeat so long as the Rosales camp believes that

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the National Electoral Council's (CNE's) official tally truly reflects the voting results on December 3. The campaign is mounting an extensive effort to deter and detect electoral fraud, including contracting exit polls, conducting a quick count, and collecting 100 percent of the polling place "actas" to make an independent tally. It is still unclear, however, whether the campaign has both the personnel and technical resources to do a credible job (septel).

16. (C) Should Rosales' advisors conclude that Chavez won by 10-20 percentage points, as predicted by a number of pre-election polls, at this point there is little prospect that Rosales would urge his people on to the streets, as Chavez continues to allege. Rosales' senior advisor Angel Emiro Vera told the DCM November 30 that Rosales is prepared to recognize a "clean" defeat. On the other hand, Vera told the DCM November 30 that if Rosales wins by a "single vote," the campaign will "not permit" the CNE to "fix" a Chavez electoral victory. Vera said the campaign will mobilize supporters at centers where no conflict is expected as a means to motivate activists to come out on the streets more broadly. Rosales' close advisors frequently note that Rosales stood up to government fraud before to secure his re-election as governor of Zulia in 2004 and stress that people from Maracaibo ("maracuchos") do not back down.

17. (C) Rosales' top advisor Omar Barboza told "El Universal" recently that this call does not refer to "violence," but rather is designed to put "people in the street" and ask the "Armed Forces to comply with their responsibility" with respect to safeguarding the voting process. MAS Secretary General Leopoldo Puchi told poloff recently that there is a lingering internal dispute within the Rosales camp as to whether to accept the CNE's official results. Puchi noted that there are a minority of "ultra-right" opposition activists who are arguing that Rosales should mobilize supporters in the event the election turns out to be close.

¶8. (C) Opposition activists frequently tell us that they will not "repeat the mistake" of the 2004 presidential recall referendum, when many opposition activists suspected fraud, but tamely accepted the results -- which they now believe to have been fraudulent -- and did not mobilize demonstrations immediately after the CNE announced the official result. The sense among many Rosales activists that this may be their last chance to unseat Chavez appears to make many of them even more prepared to be confrontational. There is a possibility that some determined opposition activists will launch some street protests in the wake of a Chavez victory as a result of both their deep mistrust of the CNE and their profound frustration with the authoritarian Chavez government.

Chavez Dirty Tricks

¶9. (C) The Chavez government has a track record of concocting "plots" immediately before national elections as a way of trying to discredit the opposition. In the run-up to the 2004 recall referendum, the BRV arrested over 30 Colombians in Caracas and alleged that they were paramilitaries contracted to participate in a coup attempt. Prior to the December 2005 parliamentary elections, the Armed Forces detained 11 people in the state of Zulia for allegedly preparing homemade incendiary devices and security forces responded to an alleged explosive device discovered in a major Caracas plaza. In addition, an oil pipeline running between the states of Zulia and Lara was hit by two explosions (but were put out almost immediately) and a third explosive device was discovered (but was found remarkably quickly in the night and detonated). In the run-up to December 3, the armed forces have occupied parastatal enterprises along the coast, purportedly to prevent "attacks and sabotage."

¶10. (C) Chavez may also spur election day violence to discourage opposition voter turn-out. Noted media commentator Jose Toro Hardy told DCM November 29 that there are rumors that 1500 members of the Francisco Miranda Front, a hard-core BRV-backed Chavista civilian vanguard, are armed and are planning to cause election-related disturbances. Toro Hardy could not confirm the veracity of the rumors. Chavez also enjoys the support of numerous radical groups, such as the Tupamaros or Lina Ron's Popular Union of Venezuela (UPV), who regularly "patrol" the heart of downtown

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Caracas. They have made the areas around the National Assembly and Miraflores, the president mansion unofficial "Chavez territory" and presumably stand ready to mix it up with any opposition demonstrations.

¶11. (C) There is also a possibility that the Chavez government, particularly if it needs to cover its tracks in the wake of electoral fraud, could overreact in an effort to smother opposition protests before they spread. Chavez has explicitly threatened independent media with shutdowns and arrests if they broadcast any projected electoral results before the CNE reports its official results. Some pro-Chavez leaders have even called on Chavistas to occupy media outlets that transmit such information. Chavez also reiterated at his November 26 mass rally in Caracas that his supporters need to be prepared to "do battle on two fronts" -- getting out the vote and, as necessary, confronting the opposition on the streets.

Embassy Actions

¶12. (C) While we have no information that leads us to believe that the government or opposition is planning specific acts

of violence, Embassy is taking reasonable precautions given the highly polarized state of politics and recent history of confrontations between the Chavez government and the opposition. Embassy has:

- urged all sides to avoid election violence and to respect the democratic process;
- pressed international observers to be more proactive in seeking improvements in electoral conditions, including the elimination of fingerprinting (digital scanning) machines;
- issued a warden notice related to the upcoming election to advise Americans to take sensible precautions related to the upcoming elections;
- requested and received additional protection for the embassy;
- provided additional training for local guard force personnel;
- conducted weekly radio checks among the embassy community;
- will hold an EAC on December 1; and,
- will have staff in the Front Office, POL, PAS, RSO, and ORA on December 3.

¶13. (C) In addition, the pairs of embassy personnel who participate in post's informal electoral observation in Caracas and eight states all received appropriate training and briefings and will be in regular phone contact with an Embassy election control center on election day. RSO vetted all polling stations to be visited, and all embassy observers for areas outside of Caracas have been provided a local police contact name and telephone number.

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